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DEP Commissioner Campbell Warns Unlawful Off-Road Vehicle Operators that Public Lands are Off Limits

(03/119) TRENTON - TRENTON - Emphasizing the growing risk to public safety and increased damages to New Jersey's natural resources, state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) Commissioner Bradley M. Campbell today warned potential violators that regulations prohibiting off-road vehicle (ORV) use on public lands are being strictly enforced.

"We have zero tolerance in dealing with illegal off-road vehicle operators who pose an increasing threat to public safety and are causing extensive damage to protected natural resources," said DEP Commissioner Campbell. "We are actively conducting area enforcement sweeps to deter illegal operators, impounding unregistered and uninsured vehicles, and seeking maximum fines for all violators."

Between January 2003 and the second week of August 2003, DEP conservation officers and park rangers issued 484 summonses against individuals participating in illegal ORV activities, resulting in fines of up to \$1,000 per violation. A total of 62 vehicles were impounded over the same time period, and 48 individuals were arrested and jailed.

During the year's first, three-day enforcement operation conducted Memorial Day weekend, conservation officers targeted illegal ORV use on the Forked River Mountain and Greenwood Wildlife Management Areas that resulted in the issuance of 56 summonses, four criminal charges, two township ordinance violations and four vehicle impoundments.

Illegal ORV use results in pollution, damage and destruction of sensitive natural resources such as forest, streams and wetlands. In many cases, these resources are destroyed and can not be restored.

In addition to the negative environmental impacts resulting from inappropriate and unlawful use of ORVs, the safety of department personnel has been at risk. Conservation officers and park rangers have been threatened and, in some cases injured, by off-road vehicle users while responding to illegal ORV activities.

"There have been 161 incidents where our conservation officers needed to take evasive actions to avoid being injured and struck by ORVs, and four officers were struck and injured," Commissioner Campbell added. "ORV use on state lands

continues to place a major burden on our limited workforce and fiscal resources that should be used to manage our wildlife and natural resources instead of unlawful activities."

An incident resulting in an injured conservation officer took place at Clarks Pond Wildlife Management Area, Cumberland County, on May 18, 2003, when an officer attempting to stop an illegal ORV was struck and thrown 32 feet. The impact resulted in a fracture of the officer's leg and a severe knee injury requiring surgery and rehabilitation. Two individuals were placed under arrest as a result of the incident.

Between May through September, on average approximately 45 percent of DEP conservation officers' time is spent addressing illegal ORV use on state lands. Annually, increased enforcement costs are approximately \$140,000 for fish and wildlife and \$757,000 for parks and forestry - totaling nearly \$900,000.

In October 2002, Commissioner Campbell announced a new policy regarding Off Road Vehicle (ORV) activities on DEP-administered lands that calls for strict enforcement of laws prohibiting ORV use on state property. The policy initiated ongoing cooperative efforts between the DEP and the Department of Transportation to establish further sanctions to deter ORV violators. In addition, new laws are being sought to ensure safe ORV use on specially designated lands, including a comprehensive licensing, registration and training program for all ORV operators.

Commissioner Campbell added that while illegal ORV use is not tolerated, the department supports the safe and proper use of ORVs in designated areas or during specially permitted events.

Acknowledging that proper ORV operation has a recreational value to a growing number of residents in the state, the DEP's new policy also calls for its Office of Natural and Historic Resources to develop appropriate recreational areas for lawful ORV use - while meeting the policy's safety and natural resource protection requirements. Two such facilities will be established and in full operation by 2005.

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